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**NASI TUMPENG,  
A WAY TO CONVEY THE MESSAGE THROUGH  
MEANINGFUL SIGNS**

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**Abstract**

As a country with a very large area, the sea of Indonesia consists of 40% out of its entire territory. Historically, Indonesian staple food was based on its geographical areas, either surrounded by seas or by mountains. However, through its development, rice has currently become the number one staple food for most of Indonesian people. Furthermore, this type of staple food has been improved and processed into various edible food. The most popular one is *tumpeng*.

Based on its form and its content, tumpeng is considered unique and exclusive. Tumpeng is basically made of cooked rice, named *nasi* in its origin language of Indonesia. Then, the rice is placed into a winnowing tray in order to make it conical. Side dishes, such as fishes and vegetables, can be laid down around the rice. The side dishes surrounding the rice make tumpeng incredibly attractive, beautiful, and neat.

The aim of tumpeng is basically to celebrate momentous events, such as birthdays, vows, gratefulness, or lucid dreams. The ceremony is started with prayer, then slicing the tumpeng in order to be divided equally to all attendees. Based on these steps, Indonesian people have great sense about tumpeng. They assume that tumpeng has a unique sign which there are also stronger signs and deeper meaning within.

**Keywords:** *tumpeng, food, sign, message, meaning, celebration, mountain, philosophy.*

**Introduction**

As a country with a very large area, the Indonesian sea consists of 40% out of its entire territory. Historically, Indonesian staple food was based on its geographical areas, either surrounded by seas or by mountains. For example, eastern Indonesia, such as Ambon, Papua, and so forth, has staple food of Sagu or Metroxylon sagu Rottb. Otherwise, western part of Indonesia

has numerous food variety. However, these circumstances have undergone a series of changes. Most of Indonesian people have chosen rice as an important staple food. Indonesian staple food diversity then has almost considered vanished. People today preferred to choose rice to be their staple food. Not only is rice easy to be processed compared to other staple food, but its availability is considerably high in Indonesia.

Rice which has Indonesian name of *beras* is made of *Oriza sativa* Linn or *padi* in Indonesian language. *Padi* can be planted on the lowlands or on the mountain-side near to the river. It also requires specific geographical conditions in order to be successfully harvested. Based on this fact, not every area of Indonesia can be planted *padi* since Indonesia has various height of lands.



Figure 1. The map of Indonesia

Not only as a staple food, rice can also be processed by Javanese society as another edible food, one of them is Tumpeng. In Java island, farmland is generally located at the lowlands, although some of them are located at the higher lands. It also requires high rainfall intensity as well as high humidity. In the higherlands, Javanese people created a particular rice

field and named it as *sawah bertingkat* or terraced rice paddies which contained a very beautiful landscape afterward.

The level of population density has generated different number of food demands on every single area in Indonesia, mostly in most populated islands, such as Sumatera, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Papua, and Java. As the most populated island among those five islands, Java has higher rice demands than any other islands. It made several parts of Java to be known as *lumbung padi* of the island which means the areas have larger rice fields among other areas.

Based on the steps of rice processing, Javanese people have their own terms and definitions of it. They name it paddy (*padi*) when the rice is still planted on the field, then grain (*gabah*) when the rice has already been harvested and separated from the stalk. Moreover, there is rice (*beras*) when those grains has been processed, and the last one is *nasi*, when they cooked it well-done.

The aim of this research is to raise up Javanese local wisdom inside *beras*—*nasi* processing connections. Eating rice (*makan nasi*) has undergone a series of different views and changes. Not only is it a meal, but eating rice is also a process of deep appreciation toward original thought. Currently, people familiarity with tumpeng considerably is normal, but it is the way different with people appreciate tumpeng in the previous time.



*Figure 2. Nasi tumpeng with the side dishes.*

### Theoretical Basis

It is really exciting to see natural circumstances. An ongoing observation brings a researcher to the point of thinking against observed objects. Arthur Asa Berger (2010) argued that an object is not something that stands alone. An object representing something to the people who see these objects. Similar argument has been explained by Marcel Danesi (2010) that an object is a sign that has a message and meaning. The other side of the community is a group of individuals who live and interact in a very dynamic community (Koentjaraningrat, 1984). Personal interests were adapted to their respective environments in order to avoid collisions. Mutual respect and appreciate, both to nature and to our fellow human beings and the Creator became a major attitude to life (De Jong, 1976). The relationship between man and the Creator becomes very deep, without having exaggerated voice but simply through a simple sign (Niels Mulder, 1980). This situation encourages people archipelago especially the Javanese to develop their creativity in expressing the symbolism and meaning of life (Herusatoto, 1985). The series of symbolism in the life is then a series of dynamic thought follow the changes in space and time which occurs along with the turning clockwise. It is not easy to interpret of an object or events in human life, but human wisdom is essential to live a life that is very dynamic wave (Suseno, 1991).

### Why is it called “Nasi Tumpeng”?

Rice processing into a confectionary encouraged the creativity of the Java community to create something new. One of them is the Java community creating a nasi tumpeng. Nasi tumpeng or better known as *tumpêng*, is a term used for rice are arranged in such a way over *tampah* or *nyiru*, in the middle there is a cone shaped rice upwards. Around of the rice cone was placed various types of side dishes which were made from various types of vegetable and animal side dishes. There are many opinions about the word tumpeng. Some argue that the cone is derived from the word *tumpeng* comes from *tumumpang ing...* and *sakkupeng ing....* The word *tumumpang ing...* refers to the cone-shaped rice which is above while *sakkupeng ing...* referring to the side dishes that are around the cone-shaped rice. No one said that this opinion is right or wrong but this is not a matter of right or wrong. It is a fact that there are views of reality.

### **Tumpêng and the Side Dishes Around**

Traditional societies organize the side dishes on *nasi tumpeng* through a unique way. The side dishes laid out on top of the *nasi tumpeng* (in the bottom) have to be located in accordance with the clockwise direction. The center point is the cone-shaped rice and the side dishes are laid down to be surrounding it which consist of vegetables and meat side dishes. Moreover, meat side dishes are *ayam goréng* (fried chicken), *sambêl goréng ati*, and *gêréh péthék* atau *iwak asin* (salt fish) and *kêring têri* and also boiled egg.

After they create meat side dishes, they also create other side dishes which made from vegetables. For example *perkedel*, they made it from *kěntang* or *solanum tuberosum* Linn. *Tahu* and *tempe bacěm* that has basic material of *kacang kědělé* or *glycine max* or *glycine soja*. Another side dishes is *sayur urap* or a mixture of different kind of vegetables, consist of *sayur bayam* (*amaranthus tricolor* Linn) or *sayur kangkung* (*ipomoea aquatica* Forsk.), *taoge*<sup>1</sup> (*solanum tuberosum* Linn), *kacang panjang* or *vigna unguiculata sesquipedalis* Linn in Latin words. These three kinds of vegetable were steamed and after that they added with some spice that they have prepared before. Those spices are made of *bawang merah* (*allium cepa* L. var *Aggregatum*), *bawang putih* (*allium sativum*), *kěncur* (*kaempferia galanga* Linn) and *garam* (*natrium klorida*), peeled and washed and pulverized into powder and then mix it with finely grated coconut. After that, these ingredients are well blended steamed in advance in order to survive more than 4 hours. Vegetables are placed on top of *tumpeng* be given additional appropriate maker desires. In general, vegetables or so-called ***lalapan*** consist of cucumber, lettuce, and so on. The addition of vegetables and any other side dishes, does not render the *tumpeng* to become a very common food, but the important thing is the sign, the message to be conveyed through the *tumpeng*.

### **Tumpeng as a Sign**

As mentioned above, the characteristic of *nasi tumpeng* is basically the cone-shaped rice. Right on the bottom of it, there will be rice which has been prepared horizontally to be the cornerstone for other side dishes. The meaning of *nasi tumpeng* appearance is to show people that the makers of *tumpeng* have known the land and the sea. Those are the people who live in fertile nature, the people who know the culinary arts, the people who know

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<sup>1</sup> Taoge are made of green beans, then being processed into sprouts or bean sprouts or *thokolan* in Javanese language.



how to eat certain procedures and the people who want to convey a particular message.

### **Tumpeng as a Message.**

It is not that easy to interpret the conveyed message in a *tumpeng*. Forms and signs have to be read carefully on it. The message that can be captured from a *tumpeng* is about the location where they live. Through *tumpeng*, they try to reveal that there are two worlds, land and sea, that can supply human food needs, public notice that the location of a very strategic and worthwhile, society must keep living environment while keeping health, people see that they can not live alone so they must keep social awareness towards society and the environment, as a climax to convey the message of human relationships and the creator.

### **Tumpeng as a Meaning**

Similar with understading the message of a *tumpeng*, it is also not that easy to find out the meaning of it. In order to find out the meaning of a *tumpeng*, it must be withdrawn from the messages that have been found out. Meaning is something very deep, the meaning is the third layer of simple understanding. Meaning that can be captured from the above message is public awareness of the natural environment is perfect (land and sea or land and water), public awareness of the location is very fertile and rich, public awareness to maintain joint health, public awareness for social and environmental conditions, and ultimately the realization that all of it a gift from God or awareness of the relationship of the creator and the creation.

Based on the description previously explained, we can make the arrangement of the map as the following,

<b>Sign</b>	<b>Message</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
people familiar with the land and sea environments	existing terrestrial and marine natural environment that can meet their food needs	awareness of the perfect natural environment (land and sea or land and water)

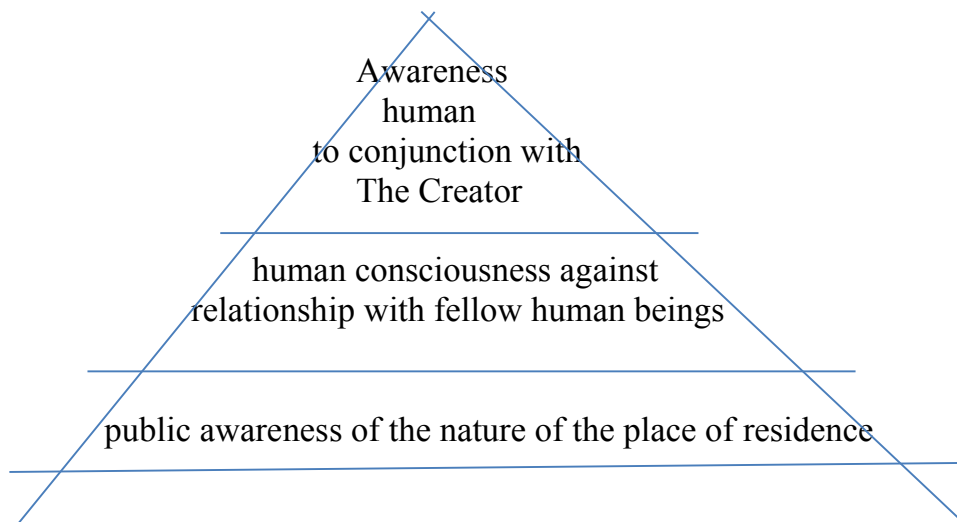
people who live in a natural environment that is very fertile	residence location is very strategic and worthwhile	awareness of the location is very fertile
people who know the culinary arts	maintain joint health	awareness to maintain joint health
people familiar with the procedures for a particular meal	understanding of social conditions of the community and the environment	awareness to maintain social conditions and the environment
people want to convey a particular message	human relations and the creator	awareness that all was a gift from God or awareness of the relationship of the creator and his creation

But how to understand it to be such a physical description of the cone is like this

<b>Sign</b>	<b>Message</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
people want to convey a particular message	human relations and the creator	awareness that all was a gift from God or awareness of the relationship of the creator and his creation
people familiar with the procedures for a particular meal	social awareness towards society and the environment	awareness to maintain social conditions and the environment
people who know the culinary arts	maintain joint health	awareness to maintain joint health
people who live in a natural environment that is very fertile	residence location is very strategic and worthwhile	awareness of the location is very fertile

people familiar with the land and sea environments	existing terrestrial and marine natural environment that can meet their food needs	awareness of the perfect natural environment (land and sea or land and water)
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So cone is a form of public awareness of the nature of the place of residence, human consciousness to do with human beings and the peak is man's consciousness of his relationship with the Creator. If it is drawn, it would be the following,



### **Human and the Creator**

Humans are creature of God. Understanding their position is easy to say, but it is not easy to do. This happens because humans believe that life on earth was to undergo a severe test. Difficult happy is a test that is never-ending. That is why rice cone is always made on winnowing or the rounded shape *nyiru*. *Tampah* or *nyiru* picture of the world is spinning for 24 hours. Life constantly changing and spins, steps of life often bring human life in a happy atmosphere at one time or in a sad mood without being able to stop, because it is the power of God.





*Figure 3: White Tumpeng and the side dishes*

All the senses of life are represented by the tumpeng through its tastes. Those senses are in the form of a bland taste, sweetness, bitterness, saltiness, taste spicy, savory, sour taste, all of which are embodied in seasoning side dishes are placed above tumpeng and around of the *nasi tumpeng*.

### **Human and the Environment**

Humans must have a high awareness. The first consciousness is the realization that human being is in a certain social environment. It means one must be aware that he lived in an environment that has the language, literature and specific culture. With this awareness, interaction between individuals must be maintained. Interactions between individuals usually involve the need to manage natural resources in order to meet the needs of everyday life. The needs of everyday life that often become a subject or disinteraction between individuals. This disintegration atmosphere often leads to violence, whereas acts of violence that must be avoided. Addition to awareness of environmental needs and awareness of joint health is very important. All food ingredients that are used to complete the tumpeng should be selected foodstuffs, processed and cooked properly. Raw foods must be processed for groceries cone chosen the right way. The choice of the material side dishes such as those of the meat must come from healthy animals, for example chicken for *ingkung*. It must be chosen from a healthy chicken because it will be cooked and to be eaten together.



*Figure 4: Ingkung ayam*

Likewise, other side dishes are particularly vegetables used as a complement to the main menu. Vegetables will strengthen the public health and should be fresh vegetables and should be having high quality. Vegetables that are processed into food are called urab.



*Figure 5: Urab sayuran*

### **Indonesian Natural Environment**

People must be aware of the existence on this earth. Earth is composed of land and water, or land and sea. People in the archipelago should be aware

that the archipelago is the most beautiful regions on earth. The archipelago has active volcanoes as many as 178 active volcanoes in the world. Just imagine, if every year there are several mountain erupts, areas affected by volcanic ash in the future it will be a very fertile area. The natural conditions are like a two-faces coin, as human life also does have a two-sides life, happiness and sadness. So with high awareness, the society must be willing to keep the environment or the neighborhood. It is not easy, but the life of the community in the future should be considered.



*Figure 6. Natural Environment*

## **Conclusion**

Tumpeng is a traditional food of its existence through space time and generation. In the archipelago, society still choose their basic needs. These are rice, or eat rice, meanwhile the cone is still to be made by the community. The wider community does not need to bother with the affairs of signs, messages and meanings carried by the tumpeng. People only need to eat and enjoy tumpeng together in a traditional ceremony which held to commemorate an event. For example kěndhuri desa. Tumpeng for the community is an common meal. Before eating together they prayed together to get a blessing from the Creator. But researchers capture the event that it is not a simple event. A long series of hidden life symbols, so it is not

considered to be arrogant, but to show the strength and courage in honor of the creator through simple meaningful inheritance.

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